

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## P.D. James, *Talking about Detective Fiction* (Faber and Faber, 2009).

If you're stuck on a double-decker bus in London, P.D. James would be the person you want beside you talking about detective fiction. As the author of sixteen bestselling detective novels over the course of half a century, James is ideally placed to wax eloquent on the subject. She has the authority of someone who knows exactly what they are talking about and has the concomitant confidence to relate that knowledge clearly. James runs the very real risk of giving literary theorists a good name as people Joe and Jolene Ordinary want to chat to on a bus.

Although James' book is clear, interesting, unpretentious and astute, it does not offer anything particularly new to the evolution of detective fiction. Cynics could claim that the newness lies in the presentation of tried and tested knowledge in a way that is clear, interesting, unpretentious and astute. But (thankfully) this has been done before too.

This book is extremely well written. Its paragraphs could be used as models of classic paragraph construction. The elegance of form and lucidity of prose are combined with a fascinating subject matter and succinct turn of phrase. For instance, James describes Jane Austen's novels as 'Mills & Boon written by a genius' (17). James, a former magistrate, also employs Hemingway's iceberg principle by suggesting a lot more than she states. For example, when discussing G. K. Chesterton's character Father Brown walking in 'snow-covered hills under the stars for many hours with a murderer', James concludes that '[w]e can be sure that whatever was spoken, it had little or nothing to do with the criminal justice system' (45).

James begins her discussion with quite an extensive explanation of what the term *detective fiction* means. This may appear strange to people new to the field of crime fiction commentary, but defining the genre *is* important, as the terms *crime fiction*, *detective fiction* and *thrillers* get used interchangeably, even if it is inaccurate to do so. Although this is a necessary inclusion for such an analysis, there are passages of text requiring more scrupulous editing. For example, James' metaphor about characters from an English cosy village 'all moving predictably in their social hierarchy like pieces on a chessboard' (84) is perfectly apt used once, but the same simile is slightly jarring when repeated. Also, it is unacceptable these days to read gender exclusive language: 'the disadvantage of a first-person narrative is that the reader can only know what the narrator knows, seeing only through his eyes and experiencing only what he experiences' (121). I blame sloppy editing rather than bad writing for such anomalies in an otherwise very good book.

Sometimes small or unexpected issues can complicate the fluent reading of a book. Physically, *Talking about Detective Fiction* is attractive and stylish and suits the prose. The cover is simple yet effective in its design, and the pages in between employ thick and quality stock. However, this elegance is incongruously offset by some pretty ordinary cartoons at the beginning of each chapter. Although the idea here may be to communicate the democratic nature of detective fiction, the result is a disconcerting lack of integration. Along the same lines, mixed messages are conveyed through the combination of no-frills cartoons with words such as 'prelapsarian', and

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such odd bedfellows beg questions about who the readership of this book is, or even whether it was carefully considered.

The book taps into the historical attitude (still held in some quarters) that detective fiction/crime fiction is literature's poor Taswegian relative. James valiantly challenges this presumption with wry comparisons between literary and detective fiction. She argues that unlike some modern literature, detective fiction has never forgotten the importance of storytelling: 'For a time in the late twentieth century it seemed that the story was losing its status and that psychological analysis, a complicated and occasionally inaccessible style and an egotistic introspection were taking over from action' (140). For support, James also includes a 1929 quote from Régis Messac, who states that '[a] good detective story possesses certain qualities of harmony, internal organisation and balance ... which some modern literature, priding itself on being superior, very often neglects' (143). In spite of these pleasing digs at the pretensions of much modern literary fiction, James lets the team down slightly with the apologetic and offensively modest supplication that 'we [sic] do not expect popular literature to be great literature' (157). But some of us do! Should Chandler be precluded from the pantheon of great writers merely because he wrote about exciting topics in a colourful style and sold a lot of books? Clearly, impressive book sales are no reliable gauge of great writing. But neither are they necessarily a guarantee of poor writing. When any great writing is recognised for its merits rather than being defined by the whims of the thought police, effective communication becomes a more viable possibility. Esteemed academic John McLaren claims that 'all writing is political in effect, if not in intention'.<sup>1</sup> The democratic nature of most detective fiction, and James' clear analysis of the genre, makes a strong political statement about including people other than the elite minority in culture. There should be more people like P. D. James to talk to on buses.

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<sup>1</sup> John McLaren, *States of Imagination: Nationalism and Multiculturalism in Australian and Southern Asian Literature* (Prestige Books, 2001) 47.